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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [LE](#) [IQ](#) [IR](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: INDEPENDENT SHIA FIGURES DISCUSS HOW TO  
COUNTER HIZBALLAH

REF: A. A. BEIRUT 918

[1](#)B. B. BEIRUT 456

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) On June 19, the Charge and visiting S/P staff member Jared Cohen met with a series of independent Shia, including activist Lokman Slim, journalist Ali Alamine, and political figure Ahmad Assad (ref A covers June 19 meeting with deposed Shia Mutfi at Tyre Syed Ali al-Amine). Slim proposed creating a moderate Higher Shia League, headed by Shia cleric Sayyed Ali al-Amin. Slim believes March 14 needs to do more to support Sayyed al-Amin and provide him with greater political legitimacy, eroded after Hizballah removed the Sayyed as Mufti of Tyre during the May clashes. Journalist Alamine, who reports on affairs in southern Lebanon, noted that he is "free to criticize Hizballah"--except for three key areas: Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's role as a resistance movement, and its weapons. Ahmad Assad was unimpressive in his demands for U.S. funding; he had apparently not thought through his proposals. End summary.

MARCH 14 NEEDS TO INCLUDE  
MODERATE SHIA VOICE  
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[1](#)2. (C) In a June 19 meeting with the Charge and visiting State Department Policy Planning staff member Jared Cohen and emboffs, independent Shia activist Lokman Slim promoted the idea of creating a moderate Higher Shia League (HSL) composed of clergy and intellectuals, which could counter the Hizballah dominated Higher Shia Council (HSC). The head of the HSL would be independent Shia cleric Sheikh Sayyed Ali al-Amin, whom the Charge and Cohen had met with immediately before this meeting (septel). Two tracks are needed to facilitate the creation of such an organization and to promote the status of Amin within the Shia community, said Slim: political support from the March 14 bloc and grassroots development.

[1](#)3. (C) Slim emphasized the need for March 14 to provide clear political support and legitimacy to Sayyed al Amin. He added that majority leader Saad Hariri continuously promises to promote the status of Sayyed al-Amin but has yet to follow through. Slim said no one in March 14 had expressed political support for al-Amin and added that al-Amin feels mistreated by the group. (Note: Slim pointed out the example of the recent public event commemorating the

one-year anniversary of the assassination of MP Walid Eido, to which Sayyed al-Amin was not invited. In contrast, Sayyed al-Amin had been the only Shia figure to participate on February 14, 2008 at the Martyrs' Square three-year commemoration of Rafiq Hariri's assassination, which was held the same day in Beirut as Hizballah leader Nasrallah spoke at Imad Mugnieh's funeral. End Note.)

14. (C) Slim suggested approaching an interlocutor such as Walid Jumblatt, PM-designate Fouad Siniora, or caretaker Cultural Affairs Minister Tariq Mitri to ask one of them to speak to Hariri to garner more support for Amin. (Note: Mitri, a Greek Orthodox, would be the best choice because he appears to understand the importance of promoting independent Shia and it may be best to have a interlocutor who is neither Shia nor Sunni, in Slim's view. Charge followed up with Mitri at a dinner later that evening. End Note.) There is a need to keep al-Amin within the group, said Slim. Slim believes March 14 will lose al-Amin if Sayyed al-Amin did not gain the means required to counter Hizballah.

15. (C) Slim added that an al-Amin-led HSL also needed GOL institutional support. He suggested that if Amin could deliver social services to the Shia, in the way that Hizballah and Amal do, then Amin could compete for Shia support. Assistance for the HSL from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Health would be a good start, he said. However, Slim reiterated that the best support would be for March 14 to provide "political legitimacy" to Sayyed al-Amin.

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EUROPEANS CAUTIOUS IN  
SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT SHIA  
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16. (C) Answering a question regarding international support for Slim's NGO, known as "Hayyabina," Slim said aid from other donors had been limited. The EU wants to remain on the safe side and has avoided public support for Slim's independent Shia movement. Support from Japan was "cautious." Slim added that possibly, if the EU saw the emergence of a strong alternative to Hizballah and Amal, then perhaps it would begin to support Hayyabina. (Note: Haayabina is a working with the International Republican Institute through State's Middle East Partnership Initiative--MEPI--and is currently engaged in a new project funded through USAID/OTI. End Note.)

OTHER MODERATE  
SHIA ACTIVE  
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17. (C) Slim said that there were many independent Shia taking risks without being asked to do so who should not be overlooked. Sheikh Mohammed Ali al-Hajj was one imam that Slim mentioned. Hajj works in the Sadd al-Bushreieh area (northern Mount Lebanon). He was once close to the Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah (considered to be Hizballah's spiritual leader), but they had a falling-out after Hajj began to criticize the "feudal lords" of southern Lebanon and especially after Hajj publicly criticized the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Hajj is well-respected among Shia and other religious groups and has good relations with several Christian churches in the Mount Lebanon area (he is also involved with Embassy Beirut's Public Diplomacy-sponsored "Teaching Women English" program), according to Slim.

18. (C) Sheikh Iyyad Jamal al-Dine could also play a big role in the new HSL, Slim said. He was the first to speak out against Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Hussein Oulayyan (the son-in-law of al-Amin), is a charismatic and courageous sheikh who is based in Tyre and was formerly affiliated with Nabih Berri's Amal party, according to Slim. He is intelligent and very knowledgeable

concerning religious matters, Slim added. Sheikh Mohammed Jamal Hamoud, a sheikh who resides in the center of the Hizballah-controlled Dahiyeh southern suburbs, is "very knowledgeable" and "cannot be touched" by Hizballah, Slim noted. Hamoud runs a small religious school in the Hizballah-held southern suburbs and has emphasized the importance of strengthening GOL institutions.

INTERNATIONAL/REGIONAL  
MODERATE SHIA GATHERINGS NEEDED  
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¶9. (C) Slim said he was open to the idea of having more regional and international summits in which moderate Shia clerics could come together to network and share ideas. This includes moderate Shia clerics from the region such as Sheikh Iyyad Jamal al-Dine (Note: Dine currently resides in Iraq, but is originally from the city of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. End Note.) Slim suggested that more meetings hosted by independent NGOs such as the Aspen Institute at which moderate Shia from Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia could come together to talk about issues moderate Shia face in their respective countries be organized. Slim added that including moderate Shia clerics from the United States in such efforts would also be useful.

USG SUPPORT CRITICAL  
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¶10. (C) When asked how the USG might help, Slim responded that providing technical assistance or funding to al-Amin's proposed HSL online fundraising website (Zakat) would be a start. In addition, Slim supported the idea of developing instance-learning courses for Shia that would provide an alternative to extremist views. Slim said Amin would need support to set up an office for the HSL (which would be located somewhere close to the principally Shia-populated southern suburbs).

INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE

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ATTEMPTS TO COUNTER HIZBALLAH  
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¶11. (C) In a meeting the same day with Ali Alamine, a journalist from the moderate Shia publication "Shoun Janoubiyeh," Alamine identified his main challenge as maintaining his independence while operating a magazine in Hizballah dominated southern Lebanon. His magazine covers political, social, and economic issues facing Lebanese in the south. Alamine added that criticizing Hizballah was indeed possible when the criticism revolved around the group's political stances. However, three red lines not to be crossed were (1) any criticism against Hizballah SYG Nasrallah, (2) Hizballah's role as a self-perceived resistance movement, and (3) Hizballah's weapons.

¶12. (C) Alamine said that when he had crossed one of these red lines in the past, he had received death threats. The threats only ceased when Alamine backtracked from his criticism. His magazine tries to reflect what is going on in the south and attempts to reflect all points of view, he said. (Note: Alamine's "Shoun Janoubiyeh" has received USAID and USAID/OTI support over the past year. End Note.)

HIZBALLAH WILL NEVER  
GIVE UP ITS ARMS  
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¶13. (C) On the issue of Sheba'a Farms, Alamine declared that Hizballah would not give up its arms even if the Israelis left Sheba'a. Alamine said the issue of Hizballah's arms is a regional matter. He believed that Hizballah would consider relinquishing its weapons if part of wider negotiations between Israel, Syria, and Iran.

## RECENT FIGHTING STRATEGIC

¶14. (C) Alamine said that fighting this week in the Bekaa Valley was an attempt by Hizballah to move its operations from the south (where UNIFIL is operating alongside the Lebanese Armed Forces) to the Bekaa. According to Alamine, Hizballah has control over the northern Bekaa region and the southern Bekaa valley, but not the central Bekaa area, which is where the recent fighting took place.

¶15. (C) Alamine said that in central Bekaa, Hizballah is forced to compete with Sunnis and Christians. This competition led to the fighting. He noted that the Sunni Mufti of Zahle and Bekaa, Sheikh Khalil al-Mays, said in a statement this week that "the recent battles in Thalabya and Saadnayel are a way to reach a new objective, by those who are trying to open a link from the south to the north; however, the citizens of this area will stop them from reaching their goals."

### HIZBALLAH STRONGEST WHEN CONFLICT EXISTS

¶16. (C) Alamine believed that Hizballah was at its strongest whenever clashes erupted. When the situation in the country is calm, Hizballah is at its weakest, he stated. However, he felt that Hizballah did not want another war with Israel--but if Iran wanted such a war, then there would be conflict, he surmised. He added that Hizballah wants the GOL to be "functional enough" to provide a moderate level of services to the people, but not strong enough to challenge its influence in the areas Hizballah dominates. The best thing may be to somehow incorporate Hizballah into the state, Alamine posited, because there was "no way" to challenge the organization directly.

### THIRD ANTI-HIZBALLAH INTERLOCUTOR UNIMPRESSIVE

¶17. (C) In the last meeting of the day with independent Shia figures, the Charge and Cohen met with Ahmad al-Assad, anti-Hizballah Shia leader and head of the Lebanese Options Group (LOG)-- (ref B.) Assad requested USG funding to hold a conference in Beirut with Shia from the region. Assad described the conference to be a launching pad for LOG's

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"bigger plan" (an ambitious catalogue of ideas passed to us during an earlier meeting which included a very expensive and not-well-thought out proposal to put 300 clerics on LOG's payroll). Assad dismissed the idea of a Shia League grouping independent Shia as "unrealistic," insisting that only his own LOG represented the independent Shia reality. (Note. Of the day's four meetings with independent Shia activists, Assad was clearly the least impressive and most self-centered. End Note.)

### COMMENT

¶18. (C) We should continue to urge U.S. NGOs and our European, Asian and Arab allies to support Lebanon's independent Shia. We believe that Lokman Slim's work with deposed Mufti of Tyre al-Amin is important. Linking Al-Amin with moderate Shia in Iraq and the Gulf should also be a key goal. End Comment.)  
SISON